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Week of June 5, 2006

BENEFICIAL RANGELAND PRACTICES AT THE PERRINS' CASTLELAND RANCH

Ted and Olive Perrin own and operate the 12,775 acre Castleland Ranch near Beechy, and it seems someone has noticed that the way they manage their rangeland is nothing short of exemplary.

The Society for Range Management (SRM), an international body governing the profession, thought their practices were so worthy of recognition that it named the Perrins recipients of a 2006 SRM Outstanding Achievement Award.

The official citation mentions how "Forward thinking and conservative range management on Castleland Ranch ensures sustainable grazing resources through extremes in climatic conditions over the short- and long-term. Many of the long-standing management approaches of Castleland Ranch are new technology for many producers."

Asked how they feel about the award, Olive Perrin is quick to recognize that other ranchers in their area are as committed to sustainable grazing as she and her husband.

"There are a whole lot of people who are conscious of range management," she says. "As a rancher, it's your job, and if you don't look after your job, it won't be there long. The rancher who does not look after his grass will suffer for it, because that is what he raises his cattle on. It is a pretty sad thing to see grassland that is a table top."

The basic formula the couple uses is: take half the grass, and leave half the grass. It is all the more important when you are running 800 head of cattle.

"Many ranchers look after their grass. If you don't have enough grass to support wildlife, well, you probably don't have enough grass to support cattle. In a dry year, if you overgraze, you have nothing. It takes grass to make grass. We sell a lot of grass-finished beef. In order to fatten them on grass, you have to have good grass, so we always make sure we don't overgraze," says Olive.

Ted Perrin believes their range management philosophy is nothing new in itself.

"Some of these practices have been around for 100 years, as far as winter and summer ranges goes," he says. "We have a couple of fairly good sized pastures here, on which we've run cattle in the summer maybe three or four times out of the last 100 years. They are kept for winter grazing. The grass is allowed to grow all summer, and we don't have the cattle here on the winter range past the beginning of June, so the grass is allowed to grow for when they come back at the end of October. They are seven months on the winter range and five months on the summer range."

Other ranchers do the same, Ted Perrin points out.

"I guess the award must have come for our rotational grazing on the summer range. We make six pastures instead of two, and we rotate the cattle around the six pastures all summer long. We try to graze each of them only once. That area is allowed to grow until June. It is all native pasture, mostly cool season grasses, but with a bit of warm season grass in there as well."

The Perrins are humbled and happy about receiving the award.

"To be recognized by our peers is a blessing after 50 years of working on this stewardship," says Ted Perrin.

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SASKATCHEWAN STOCK GROWERS ASSOCIATION TO MEET IN ESTEVAN

The 93rd annual general meeting and convention of the Saskatchewan Stock Growers Association (SSGA), scheduled from June 11 to 13 in Estevan, will have a more positive outlook than the previous years' meetings.

The bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE) nightmare seems more under control, and hopes of prosperity are re-emerging, as the convention's program attests.

The meeting starts unofficially on Sunday with a golf tournament, and the real business starts on Monday at the annual general meeting. The guest speaker is Ron Witherspoon of Interactive Management Group, a well-known agriculture consultancy. His presentation is entitled "Farming has a Future."

Tuesday begins with a presentation by Judy Stitt of the Canadian Cattle Identification Agency (CCIA), which will bring SSGA members up to date on the identification initiative.

"As executive director and national administrator of the Canadian Cattle Identification Agency, Julie is working with industry organizations, government agencies and producer groups to ensure the success of the national livestock identification and tracking program for animal health and food safety within Canada," explains Sheila Fishley, general manager of the SSGA.

Following that will be a panel session—a first for the SSGA—that will be moderated by Kevin Hursh, well-known agriculture columnist and certified agricultural consultant. The panel will feature the U.S. National Cattlemen's Beef Association economist Greg Doud; Brad Wildeman, Canadian Cattlemen's Association (CCA) vice-president and chair of its foreign trade committee; Arno Doerkson of the Canada Beef Export Federation; and Charlie Gracey, a long-time CCA official, former member of the Canadian International Trade Tribunal and former president of the Canadian Beef Grading Agency.

The panel discussion will focus on expanding the Saskatchewan cattle industry in export-dominated markets.

"We are hoping people will bring lots of questions, and we feel this is something that will interest the Saskatchewan beef industry," says Fishley.

The AGM and convention program is available on the SSGA website at: www.saskatchewanstockgrowers.com/

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SAF'S 2006 FARM MACHINERY CUSTOM AND RENTAL RATE GUIDE IS NOW AVAILABLE

The 2006 edition of the Farm Machinery Custom and Rental Rate Guide, published by Saskatchewan Agriculture and Food (SAF), is now available.

The publication is designed to help producers calculate how much their equipment costs to operate and how much they might charge for doing custom work, be it seeding, spraying or harvesting.

The publication is a calculation of the equipment and labour expenses to complete the listed custom operations. The expenses include fuel, opportunity cost, depreciation and repairs, along with a profit margin (15 per cent), explains Joe Novak, Provincial Specialist, Crop Economics, who compiled the guide. Many producers will do some spraying, seeding or harvesting for other producers, and the guide helps them to know how much to charge.

"This guide gives them a bit of a guideline on how much to charge," he says. "It is not a survey of the market, but it is a guide to help. I always recommend that producers phone around and talk to people who do this as a business in order to decide what a fair rate might be."

For people wishing to do custom work as an ongoing business, the amounts you can charge and still generate a profit might be different, explains Novak.

"This is because our calculations are based on hours of use that a typical farmer might require. Custom operators would be able to spread their fixed costs over more acres, meaning a lower cost. But at the same time, our expenses do not include liability insurance, advertising, shop equipment and transportation costs, which would increase your costs. As such, custom operators need to do more thorough calculations to determine their costs."

It is strongly recommended to determine and agree upon a rate before doing any custom work. Negotiating the price after the work is done can cause disagreements.

"The biggest changes from the 2004 version are the increases in fuel and equipment prices. The price of diesel fuel has gone up 42 per cent since 2004. The price of steel has skyrocketed, but, due to the rising Canadian dollar, the price of equipment manufactured in the U.S. has increased by zero to a modest 10 per cent. Canadian manufactured equipment has increased more in the range of five to 15 per cent since 2004."

Novak says the Farm Machinery Custom and Rental Rate Guide is one of SAF's most popular publications. It is revised every two years, and has been published by the department for the past 30 years.

The Farm Machinery Custom and Rental Rate Guide is available on the department's website, www.agr.gov.sk.ca under the heading Business Arrangements, or can be obtained by calling the Agriculture Knowledge Centre at 1-866-457-2377.

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MEAT AND BONE MEAL AS A POTENTIAL SOURCE OF ENERGY

It would be fair to say that engineers have an eye for finding value in the most unusual sources, and this time is no different. Scientists at the University of Saskatchewan (U of S) are trying to determine the potential for using meat and bone meal to generate electricity. The project is being funded through Saskatchewan Agriculture and Food's (SAF) Agriculture Development Fund (ADF #20050714).

After BSE hit, meat and bone meal became worthless, says Terry Fonstad, a professor of Agricultural and Bioresource

Engineering. The rendering industry, left with a by-product that now cost them money to dispose of safely, is actively exploring new uses of meat and bone meal.

Fonstad believes the energy potential of meat and bone meal is very real. It has about three-quarters of the heating value of coal, although it does have a high ash content because of the bone meal.

"What do we do with coal?" he asks. "We gasify it to produce a syngas—a gas made up of hydrogen, methane and carbon monoxide—which we use as a fuel to turn a turbine to produce hot water and electricity."

Fonstad realized that, if there was a way to add some value to meat and bone meal by turning it into a feed source for a small gasification unit, every rendering facility in Western Canada could acquire one.

He estimates that 50 per cent of the material that escapes from these rendering plants is steam, 25 per cent is tallow and the remaining 25 per cent is bone that has no value. If renderers could reduce the 25 per cent that is bone to three per cent—just the ash—it would solve many problems.

"They wouldn't have to haul the meal to a central location for safe disposal; they could derive a lot of energy—electricity and hot water—from it; and they could reduce the volume of waste that needed disposal from 25 per cent to three per cent."

Fonstad got his group working on some preliminary investigations into a range of different processes. Any kind of biomass has heating value, he explains. General Motors made thousands of little gasifiers during the Second World War. They worked by heating biomass until it turned to char and gave off gas. The gas and char were burned in a high pressure anaerobic chamber that restricted the amount of oxygen, prevented complete combustion and produced methane, carbon monoxide and nitrogen. This gas—the syngas—could then be burned in a generator to produce electricity and hot water, both of which are useful in the rendering process.

One of the potential problems, according to Fonstad, is that gasification processes require biomass to be burned at a low temperature, whereas government regulations require rendering by-products be burned at a high temperature for a long time to eliminate the danger of BSE-causing prions.

"So if we are going to do this, we will have to balance the requirements of the gasification system process with the regulatory requirements for destruction of prion materials. Can we design the process to satisfy the regulatory requirements for destruction of that material and still have an efficient process for gasifying meat and bone meal as an energy source? That is one of the questions we will address."

Fonstad knows the project is ambitious, but the potential rewards are great, while doing nothing is not really an option.

"If we can put value into the meat and bone meal, that value will be passed on to the farm. It is a service to the industry and the farm. This is why doing something is the best option. If it can be utilized, that is the best way."

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WESTERN BEEF DEVELOPMENT CENTRE FIELD DAY, JUNE 27

The eighth annual Western Beef Development Centre Field Day will be held on Tuesday, June 27 at the Termuende Research Farm near Lanigan, Saskatchewan.

The WBDC team has put together a compelling program for the day.

"Our main speaker for the morning is the vice-president of the Canadian Cattlemen's Association, Mr. Brad Wildeman of

Pound-maker Agventures," says WBDC president David Gullacher. "Brad will be speaking about new market development for the Canadian beef industry. We think it is a timely topic for the beef industry, and we are limiting the agenda to one main speaker because we want to allow enough time to go into depth."

After a lunch provided by the Termuende Trust Fund and served by the Carlton Trail 4-H Beef Club, field tours will take participants to look at ongoing studies at the Termuende Research Farm. There will be three stops on the field tour this year, explains Dr. Bart Lardner, WBDC's senior research scientist.

"The first one is a combination of electric fencing demonstrations—how producers can better use electric fences to improve pasture management and rotational grazing. There are some pitfalls to setting up electric fences, so we have Wil Rex, a fencing specialist, to address those issues. At that same stop, we will also talk about a pasture grazing study and some of the project results. We are looking at beef performance grazing four new pasture varieties seeded in the pasture rotation. Charlotte Ward, a grad student, will be discussing that topic."

The group will then move to another stop to look at the carryover effects of nutrient management when winter-feeding beef cows.

"We are looking at field-feeding beef cows," Lardner continues, "and the subsequent nutrients that are left behind; how they benefit that site over the following several years. So it is very visual. We have some new information three years after we have completed that project."

The last stop will feature an ongoing water management initiative.

"We have worked with the PFRA over the years and have just entered into another study looking at sulphate reduction in livestock water," Lardner says. "Sulphates are an issue in well water. We are working with Dr. Sue Baldwin at the University of British Columbia, and with the PFRA, to develop a model that will reduce these sulphates. I think we have struck some good stuff. We will be talking about this at an outside demonstration site that will be set up to give producers a good look."

A bus tour will run concurrently that will give producers a look at the general operations of the research farm. Both tours will be repeated so producers can catch each one.

After this, the group will return to the main barn at the research farm for some technical presentations from 3:30 p.m. to 5:00 p.m. There are three talks of 20 to 25 minutes scheduled, with a question period following.

The first presenter will be the WBDC beef economist Kathy Lang, who will talk about her cost-of-production program. She collected producer data over the past winter, and will present an overview of that information. Following her will be Bruce and Patty Chern, beef producers from the Stockholm area, who will discuss their techniques for managing their animals from time of calving, as well as low-cost winter feeding, more effective use of forages and how they market their own beef.

"We always like to have a presentation on herd health," says Lardner, "so the final presentation will be by Dr. Steve Hendrick from the Western College of Veterinary Medicine in Saskatoon, who will talk about managing Johne's Disease in the beef industry. We think this is a key message that needs to be heard."

The day will close with a steak barbeque.

Registration is from 9:00 to 10:00 a.m. There is no charge for the day's activities. More details can be found at the WBDC website at http://www.wbdc.sk.ca/ or by telephoning 306-682-3139.

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